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Auto/biographic narration in the process of identity construction: Pedagogical contexts

Introduction

Every day, moment, decision or episode is an element of an individual's life story. A life story is a set of experiences, emotions, and situations that occurred in the close or distant past. An individual's biography contains the entire story of his or her life. Part of that story is education, but it is also his identity (as it is being formed). Both these 'parts' are not only immanent components of the life story, but — as I will discuss later — they are also significantly connected. That creates an unusual challenge for any pedagogue: knowing and understanding their relationship, character, and meaning — and also understanding how they permeate each other — seems to be an extremely legitimate and important task, which most likely shall also be helpful in the process of constructing and understanding educational processes. In this work I would like to consider the question of the formation of human identity in an autobiographical context, referring to the category of identity with special regard to educational biography, which I consider to be a special case of thematic biography (important for the identity category), and the category of narration, which is also crucial for understanding the auto/biographical phenomenon.

Biography — autobiography — life story

Norman Denzin (1990, p. 13) claims that a biography shows the experiences and definitions of a given individual, group, or an organisation in a man-

ner in which these individuals, groups or organizations interpret those experiences. Every individual has an unrepeatable biography that forms a unique life story. All biographies, as different as people and their fates, have one thing in common: they are unique and unrepeatable. Claiming that the biography is in some way a conventionalized form of expressing life experiences (Nowak, 1998, p. 103), Denzin singled out some fixed elements: the presence of another person (biographical texts are written with an awareness of the reader, 'the other person'), influence and meaning of gender and social class, family roots, first significant experiences, known authors and observers (someone that knows the life story of a person being described), objectivising signs (e.g. the author's house), real people with their real lives, ground-breaking episodes, and real statements (Denzin, 1989, p. 103). Acknowledging biography as a kind of conventionalized form does not interfere with the fact that an individual biography is always unrepeatable and unique. It only underlines that biographies have some common threads, but their content is never the same.

An individual's biography is an invaluable source of information on the individual and his or her life. We discover the biography of a given individual by gathering information on him or her and finding his or her story. Sometimes the source is the person him/herself (biography based on autobiographical narration), but it can also be based on biographical materials such as memoirs, diaries, letters, and other people's reminiscences (Giza, 1991, pp. 102–103). Autobiography presents a biography which is a "real course of life formed by the general principles of collective life which determine the common fate of some groups and collectivities" (Giza, p. 102). Autobiography presents the life as it was really lived, it is a 'subjective report from the course of life.'

Besides information on the person and his or her life, a biography, as Anna Giza (1991) claims, "presents the peculiarity (inbeing) of social reality" (p. 105). It also contains some knowledge about the phenomena occurring in the individual's environment, as well as some social events and shows what happened at a particular time in the field of, for example economy, education, politics, religion or culture. The knowledge found in the individual's biography is subjective, which means that it is presented from that individual's perspective. Therefore, we learn some facts through the lens of evaluation and perception of the individual that the biography concerns. That depicts how some facts and episodes were perceived by the individual. Finally — this subjective reception of reality allows us to get to know the person. An individual's perspective gives us information on the individual him/herself. It appears that an individual perspective contributes much to scientific cognition despite its subjectiveness. The evidence for that could be the increasing interest of various scientific disciplines in individual biography or, to be exact — the biographical literature based on sociology, social psychology,

pedagogy, and andragogy.¹ These disciplines cover human biography and use the developed methods to study and analyze it; they try to answer some questions posed within those disciplines concerning an individual's life and the individual him/herself.

Biography can also take the form of autobiographical knowledge, which is a kind of reflection on an individual's own story. That story may not be shared with others (neither on paper nor orally) because — as Duccio Demetrio claims — autobiographical thought is also a state of spirit, peculiar and quite rare, sometimes considered to be a kind of grace (Demetrio, 2000, p. 10). However, it may be directed towards others, to the reader, expecting his or her interest, as it happens with many autobiographical works in the Polish publishing market. Those works are met with great interest and sometimes lead to tempestuous discussions (see Wałęsa, 2011; Tusk, 2013; Kortko & Watoła, 2012 [on Prof. Ariadna Gierrek-Łapińska]).

Educational biography as a specific case of biography

In considering biography we can perceive it as an exhaustive life story, including all the fields of an individual's life. Biography can also be perceived fragmentarily, in those cases we are dealing with thematic biography. It is a part of the complete biography covering some specific area of life. According to Denzin, thematic biography covers the information concerning a specific life area (e.g. occupation, education) or a specified life phase (e.g. youth, adulthood) (Denzin, 1970, in Włodarek & Ziółkowski, p. 17). Władysława Szulakiewicz (2004) noticed that there are already some commonly used definitions in literature on the subject: general biography, scientific biography, popular science biography, historical biography, pedagogical biography, educational biography, literary biography, political biography, and many more (p. 5).

Thematic biographies of different people can be similar, as they concern similar or even the same fields/topics. For example, two people can receive a similar educational background. Despite this similarity, the biographies are not the same, as the people are different. Each biography has its own

¹ In the field of Polish sociology, a special place in the study of biographies is reserved for Florian Znaniecki (see W. Thomas & Florian Znaniecki. (1976). *Chłop polski w Europie i Ameryce*. Warszawa). In the field of pedagogical psychology and developmental psychology, Charlotta Büchler was involved in biographical research. Within the andragogical approach, there are the various noteworthy works of, for example: Olga Czerniawska, Eugenia Anna Wesołowska, Elżbieta Dubas, Hanna Solarczyk, Danuta Lalak.

unrepeatable, unique features, because besides describing facts, episodes and individuals, there is also an immanent element of subjective reflection on these issues. Biography (autobiography) "remains in a limbo between the objective facts and the subjective meaning set by the author" (Giza, p. 101).

Educational biography concerns an individual's participation in the educational process. This participation covers a number of episodes, situations, and influences which took place during a particular time period, in this case the time of education. According to Schulze, pedagogical activity always has a "biographical reference" (Backe & Schulze, 1993, p. 13), as upbringing is "a form of accompanying in the biography, and thus it structures the individuals' biographies" (Jacob, 2001, p. 111). Educational biography shows mainly the participation of a particular individual in education. We learn about the individual's participation in the process: what schools he or she graduated from, what kind of a student he or she was, what were his or her relationships with others, what and how he or she studied, what his or her grades were, etc. One of thematic biography's advantages is the fact that it is always somehow related to biography as a whole. It can even be said that "both types of biography permeate each other" (Helling, p. 17). Thematic biography is an integral part of the individual's whole life story and is not detached from the broader context of the individual's life.

Therefore, in educational biography one may also find some information on other areas of the subject's life. This stems from the nature of human life itself, and its inherent multidimensionality. And so education connects to family life. A person's professional career is related to education, but there are some aspects of family life present as well. Particular areas of human activity remain connected in a way, they occur simultaneously, thus creating the general context of an individual's life, his or her history. That context complements the thematic biography, completes particular stories, and shows them in a broader scope. It adds to what is not told directly, but also reveals a variety of dependences. Thus, it is extremely valuable, as it allows one to have a deeper understanding of particular life stories and to notice some connections.

Educational biographies are a potential source of knowledge concerning various aspects of an individual's participation in education. One of those aspects is identity. Creating an identity goes hand in hand with creating one's own self, and creating an educational biography; furthermore, accompanies it but is also an element of an educational biography. That is why I described it as a special case of biography. According to Hanna Malewska-Peyre, by studying a biography we have a chance to "catch what is the least variable in identity, best stored in memory, and most important for preserving one's own distinctiveness" (2000, p. 130). The creation of identity takes place mostly at the time of acquiring an education in school, but it goes

outside these confines, coexisting with further education later on. Education, upbringing, and socialization have a major impact on identity creation, they are the fields for identity processes. In the field of education there occur those processes which — besides their main functions of forming a personality and socializing — serve the development of an individual's identity. They provide information and situations helpful with respect to formulating one's own self, and self-definition, creating an image of their own self, creating a self-concept. Education, along with upbringing and socialization, is processual and constant, very much like the formation of identity. Knowing someone's biography is to some extent like knowing the individual and his or her identity. The identity itself, as it has a complex and developmental nature, can even be claimed to form a thematic biography: the story of the formation of an individual's identity, which is close to Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity. Biographies, being life stories, are also stories of learning.² Learning is an immanent part of an individual's life, regardless of one's educational route. It is during the learning process (participation in education) that processual identity structuring takes place and the meaning of one's life is constructed. Thus, in educational biography one can also find the scope of the life story which concerns the individual's identity.

Autobiographical memory and its role in the sense of self-continuity

One of the criteria of identity is a sense of self-continuity over time. This criterion can be met due to the existence of autobiographical memory, which is the memory of personal experiences and autobiographical facts (Niedźwieńska, 2011, p. 111). Problematic aspects of biography are strongly connected to autobiographical memory. We deal with three phenomena here: identity, autobiographical memory, and biography, all of these are specifically connected. Those connections can be analyzed through the prism of the functions of autobiographical memory. As Agnieszka Niedźwieńska claims, the most important is the intrapersonal function of autobiographical memory, which allows one to construct and store the definition of 'I' and one's own history (that is biography). Remembering one's life story is the basis for personal identity. Thus, autobiographical memory is a mechanism

² Authors Backe and Schulze, in a joint publication *Aus Geschichten Lernen* (Weinheim, München, 1979), claim that a story of life is mainly a story of learning, referring to foregoing works in the field of biographical research. See also D. Urbaniak-Zajac & J. Piekarski (Eds.) (2001). *Jakościowe orientacje w badaniach pedagogicznych*. Łódź, p. 80.

that allows us to preserve our life story (our own biography), which, in turn, allows us to fulfil an important criterion of identity: a sense of self-continuity. That is how these three phenomena deeply permeate each other, justifying, in my estimation, the consideration of identity in the context of educational biography.

Autobiographical memory, apart from the intrapersonal function identified by Niedźwieńska, also has an adaptive and interpersonal function (Niedźwieńska, p. 111). Episodic memory makes it easier for us to adapt to new conditions and situations. It is a kind of asset from which we can draw knowledge, and thus it is helpful in an adaptation process. The interpersonal function is extremely important, as it contributes to making friends and maintaining various relationships with other people. It happens through the exchange of personal stories, which is the way people may become friends.

Tomasz Maruszewski (2005) claims that autobiographical memory, seemingly constituting a part of the general memory of a person, is a complex phenomenon itself, which can be observed, for example through the functions it fulfils. Similarly to Niedźwieńska, the author divides functions into intrapersonal (emphasizing that they are mainly connected with self-identity) and interpersonal. He goes further though, introducing a more specific classification and highlighting the following functions of autobiographical memory: informative, communicative, interpersonal, motivational-emotional, and organizational (Maruszewski, 2005, pp. 78–89). In the context of considering the relationships between autobiographical memory and identity, special attention should be paid to the communicative function. According to Maruszewski, the communicative function of autobiographical memory allows us to inform other people as to who we are, what kind of person we are and what is our position in the group. This situation is possible owing to the ability to recall particular moments from an individual's life story, which is granted by autobiographical memory. Thus, it should be said that this particular function of autobiographical memory allows an individual to build his or her social identity.

Autobiographical memory plays an important role in current social functioning. According to Maruszewski, it allows us to use our previous experiences in a reasonable way, it enables planning our future behaviors and establishing relationships with other people. We can say that it has similar functions as identity. Remembering our own life story is in some way an asset that we can use on various occasions. This kind of memory stores the memories that contribute to the process of building the image of 'I' by delivering information about the individual and his or her actions, but those memories also allow us to change ourselves through the process of self-reflexion called by Demetrio "an autobiographical thought." The author says that this thought is a collective of all the memories gathered during

an individual's life. He claims that this unexpected form of reflexion on an individual's own existence usually accompanies him or her through a whole life; its permanent secretive presence is constantly encouraging the individual to reflect and meditate on his or her life. Also, recollecting memories may become the sense and superior value of life (Demetrio, p. 10). Autobiographical thought is born from the identity of the individual that is speaking about him/herself. It may be covered by intensive feelings from the past, it may coexist with other people's stories, and their identities. According to Demetrio, autobiographical thought has a mysterious and beneficial power that is based on delving into one's own past. This results in the emerging sense of fulfilment. However, as Giza says, telling a story and experiencing one's own life are dependent on a particular way of thinking, knowledge, cognitive competence [...] and linguistic competence (p. 105).

In my deliberations over autobiographical thought there occurs an analogy to the question of biographical competence by Zbigniew Pietrusiński (1990). Autobiographical thought is a specific reflexion on one's own life story. It is an element of biographical competence. Biographical competence expresses itself in biographical thinking, thus reflexiveness aids in building biographical competence. One of an individual's reflexiveness forms is autobiographical thought. Here we are faced with the duality of tasks that autobiographical thought must complete. One is building the biographical competence that helps the individual in making the right choices and decisions, a skilful constructing of life's journey, and in effect it serves the process of self-development. The other task for autobiographical thought may be its becoming a kind of therapy. According to Demetrio, the effort of recollecting the past puts us closer to others and allows us to judge the past, which sometimes may be difficult. Thanks to that effort of dealing with the past, we can accept it with humility. The author claims that the most important thing is about creating a positive attitude to one's own experiences, because life itself is the only solid gift that a human has received from fate (Demetrio, pp. 10–11). This therapy, which helps us deal with the past and provides us with a good mood and calmness, also helps in building biographical competence. As a result, it contributes to the improvement of individual's life quality.

Narration in the construction of identity

Narration, similar to identity, is a term, the meaning and position of which changes and increases. The change of this term's position in the field of social sciences occurs because the (post)modernist era is extremely suspi-

cious towards metanarration. According to Marzec (2002b, p. 3) it means that postmodernist science no longer places its trust in the knowledge legitimation created in the modern era, which was traditionally delivered by philosophy. The metanarration crisis means opening for what is particular, local, discontinuous, unrepeatable, contextual, and idiosyncratic (p. 4). It is an opening on individuality, which is one of the main changes in contemporary society.

The term 'narration' derives from the Latin *narratio*, which means telling a story, rehearsing (*Słownik wyrazów obcych*, 2003, p. 757). Thus, narration is simply storytelling. Storytelling, on the other hand, as Peter Alheit notices, is a way of reviving the past (2002, p. 103). Narration may be perceived as a "way of organizing episodes, actions, and tales that concern those episodes, linking facts and imagination's creations using the category of time and place." Mirosława Nowak-Dziemianowicz claims that self-narration is also a tool that helps the individual understand him/herself, as it organizes an individual's experiences (2002, p. 61).

The narration metaphor is universal and allows one to consider the various aspects and dimensions of culture transformation (Grzegorek, 2003; Janusz, Gdowska, & de Barbaro, 2008). It appears in various areas of reflexion, for example in the philosophy of a person, epistemology, psychoanalysis, pedagogics, feminism, and — as Marzec notices — post-structuralism. Narration also plays an important role in the construction of identity. According to Katarzyna Rosner, those who desire to break the impasse on contemporary reflexion over a human and his or her culture reach for the term of narration. The term usually appears when questions about human identity in post-modern society emerge (1999, p. 8). The author also notices that in many researchers' opinions, narration also appertains to mental processes, which play a fundamental role in everyday life. In those processes we process and interpret our experiences and we project out future actions (Rosner, 2003). According to Nowak-Dziemianowicz, the term 'narration' widens our understanding of identity; it allows us to change the perception of the individual. We move from seeing his objective social position or structure, which determines the way in which the individual acts and reacts to the world, into perceiving his statements concerning himself as reasonable and self-conscious. Identity then is a form of autobiography (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2002, p. 61).

Narration can mean telling something to somebody, so it is also a specific kind of communication. It may mean a peculiar communication creation, that is, the text and we use it to express the story. Narration is also a specific form of cognitive representation of the surrounding reality (Trzebiński, 2002, p. 13). Narration is a story about life (life story) or rather a short story about life. The result of this narration is the creation of the individual's biography,

life story. A life story is also a story about identity, a story of creation and constructing the identity. This way of thinking leads to the formulation of the term 'autobiographical narration,' which seems to be more appropriate in the context of these deliberations.

Autobiographies (life stories) are a very specific type of biographical narration. Life stories are most often delivered by various narrators in speech as a story of their own life. Less often the narration comes in writing: diaries, memoirs or autobiographies. It may come as a spontaneous statement — a story of one's own life is initiated by some particular moment or event. It happens in biographical studies though, that the situation is planned and there are some measures used to initiate the narration and to help maintain it. The aim is to have the best possible insight into an author's biography and life story (Urbaniak-Zajac, Piekarski, 2001; Włodarek & Ziółkowski, 1990).

A specific case is a situation wherein the researcher wants to know the thematic biography. It is specific because knowing the thematic biography concerning a given area of an author's activity allows directing the narration into a desired topic, thus giving the opportunity to show this biography profoundly. In the case of educational biography, it is possible to direct the narrator onto some threads using general questions concerning education, an area well known (which results, e.g. from the fact that school is obligatory), thus helping the narrator to recall the story. Such narration may lead to the area of individual, unrepeatable personal experiences. It allows the listener to see the individual life story, which can sometimes be very similar to other biographies, but it is unique and unrepeatable. One condition for that is the readiness of the narrator and the maturity of autobiographical thought. Also, from the perspective of biographical research the atmosphere during the narration is important as well. The narrator's mood can be an important factor influencing the narration process (cf. Alheit, 2002; Maszke, 2004, pp. 172–178).

Conducting narration by the narrator, whether in speech or on paper, may also have several functions. One of those is the informative function. Thanks to the autobiographical narration about education, a listener or a reader can learn about the narrator's educational journey. For instance, he or she learns about his or her experiences and subjective feelings, as well as important episodes, grades, teachers, favorite classes, and how the narrator perceived him/herself as a student at a given educational stage.

Weaving the story of an individual's own life, narration may also have a therapeutic function. As I wrote before, reconstructing the past may sometimes require courage, but it allows a person to deal with his or her own past, especially the negative parts of it. As Demetrio (p. 10) claims, the autobiographical thought resulting in storytelling (conducting a narration) is a method for achieving better insight and some release. In particular, the

autobiographical thought often concerns upsetting and painful experiences, mistakes made in the past, disappointments or unexploited chances — recalling such memories requires some effort and may create trauma. However, in effect of undertaking the effort of narration, a feeling of calmness and relief appears, in essence creating a ceasefire in confronting the past (p. 10).

Pedagogical implications

It is obvious that analyzing education is important for the understanding of educational processes and their consequences, but it is also important for the sake of enhancing education (even if it means simply adjusting education to contemporary times). It is equally obvious how important it is to face the challenges of knowing and understanding the essence of human identity and contemporarily contextualized identity processes, strongly grounded in post-modernist compilations of change and identity types.

Modern times demand us to perceive the identity of an individual also with respect to educational processes. Studying educational biographies demands noticing the human identity as an important individual episode, but also as an important process submerged in the area of education. In a broader context, studying a life story demands noticing the category of human identity as a crucial part of that history (cf. Majewska-Kafarowska, 2010). The present interest of various disciplines in biographic literature creates great hopes for building knowledge on human identity, regarding the character of liquid modernity which we desperately need.

In my deliberations, I made an attempt to show the relationships and interpenetration between the categories such as auto/biography, identity, autobiographical memory, and biographical narrative, hoping that the reader will understand the pedagogical implications that I have formulated.

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Agnieszka Majewska-Kafarowska

Narration auto/biographique dans le procédé de formation de l'identité : Contextes pédagogiques

Résumé

Dans le présent texte, l'auteur a engagé une réflexion sur la formation de l'identité dans le contexte de l'auto/biographie de l'homme tout en recourant à la catégorie d'identité, compte tenu de la biographie éducative considérée comme un cas particulier de la biographie thématique (essentiel pour la catégorie d'identité) et de la catégorie de narration qui est nécessaire à la compréhension du phénomène de l'auto/biographie. La biographie de l'homme est une source inappréciable d'informations sur sa vie, sur un homme donné. En faisant la connaissance de la biographie d'une personne donnée, en recueillant des informations sur elle, on fait la connaissance de sa vie soit racontée par elle-même (biographie transmise à travers une relation autobiographique), soit incluse dans des textes biographiques comme p.ex. : mémoires, journaux, lettres ou souvenirs des autres. D'après l'auteur, l'un des critères de l'identité est la sensation de continuité de soi-même dans le temps. On peut remplir ce critère grâce à la mémoire autobiographique, c'est-à-dire grâce à la mémoire contenant des incidents personnels et des faits autobiographiques. À la mémoire autobiographique est fortement liée la problématique de la biographie. Dans ce texte, l'auteur présente un embrouillement fort spécifique des trois catégories suivantes : de l'identité, de la mémoire autobiographique et de la biographie.

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Narracja auto/biograficzna w procesie konstruowania tożsamości: Konteksty pedagogiczne

Streszczenie

W tekście niniejszym Autorka podjęła rozważania nad zagadnieniem kształtowania się tożsamości w kontekście auto/biografii człowieka, odnosząc się do kategorii tożsamości ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem biografii edukacyjnej nazywanej przypadkiem szczególnym biografii tematycznej (istotnym dla kategorii tożsamości) oraz kategorii narracji, kluczowej dla pojmowania zjawiska auto/biografii. Biografia człowieka jest nieocenionym źródłem informacji o jego życiu, o danym człowieku. Poznając biografię danej osoby, zbieramy o niej informacje, poznajemy jej historię, czy to od niej samej (biografia przekazana poprzez relację autobiograficzną), czy to z materiałów biograficznych, jak np. pamiętniki, dzienniczki, listy, wspomnienia innych. Jak pisze Autorka, jednym z kryteriów tożsamości jest poczucie ciągłości siebie w czasie. Kryterium to może być spełnione dzięki pamięci autobiograficznej, czyli pamięci zdarzeń osobistych i faktów autobiograficznych. Z pamięcią autobiograficzną silnie wiąże się problematyka biografii. W tekście tym Autorka ukazuje specyficzne splątanie trzech kategorii: tożsamości, pamięci autobiograficznej i biografii.